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ABSTRACT

This comment on Roger D. Gross's definition of "style" explores the ramifications of that definition for the theatre teacher. It is noted that Gross's definition may help with two common pedagogic difficulties: (1) convincing students that theatre and drama of the past were regarded by their audiences and practitioners as entirely realistic, for the most part: and (2) convincing students that realism is, in fact, as heavily reliant upon conventions of performance and dramaturgy as the most austere plays of Aeschylus or the most mannered acting techniques developed by the French Neo-Classicists. A brief overview of past and present criticism of the plays of Euripedes is then provided to put many critical views in perspective, and a play by the contemporary English playwright Steve Gooch is analyzed to show the benefits of applying Gross's terminology to dramatic criticism. (AEA)

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GROSS'S DEFINITION OF STYLE IN PEDAGOGY

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In providing us with a first attempt at a precise definition of "style," Professor Gross is also attempting to revivify a now unsuable term. Although "style," and its various cognates "stylized," "stylistic," and all the rest are heard with great frequency in our theatres, in our classrooms, and in our published dramatic and journalistic criticism, the terms remain valueless, precisely because of their imprecision--as, indeed, Professor Gross points out. For most of us, theatre educators, students, and professionals alike (not to mention the general public), "style" invariably means something entirely external to the play or performance; not only is it external, but it usually is artificially imposed as well. Indeed, for most beginning students to hear that something is "stylized" or that something relies heavily on "style" is to hear a loud warning bell indicating probable incomprehension and potential boredom, either in the study or in the theatre. In production, as Professor Lee will indicate, additional problems acrue to the imprecision with which the term "style" is now employed.

The new working definition that Professor Gross offers to us may help to alleviate some of those problems, as well as to point

the way to solving additional ones. I would like, therefore, to explore some of the ramifications of Professor Gross's statement for the theatre teacher, leaving the practical production aspects for Professor Lee to cope with. My remarks are intended to provide helpful examples, not to be definitive; I would hope that part of the debate engendered by this morning's panel would be the refinement and possible expansion of Professor Gross's definition.

In reading Roger's paper, I was immediately struck with ways his definition will help with two pedagogic difficulties that I face every year): those of convincing students that theatre and drama of the past were regarded by their audiences and practitioners as entirely realistic (for the most part) and, secondly, of convincing students raised on the mechanical media's realistic performances that "realism" (with a lower case r) is, in fact, as heavily reliant upon conventions--both of performance and dramaturgy--as the most austere plays of Aeschylus or the most mannered acting techniques developed by the French Neo-Classicists in the days of Racine. Most often, I convince students through that time-honored pedagogic approach, "believe the instructor or you'll get a low grade." That works, of course, but is hardly the most effective way of going about it. The definition you've heard this morning gives me some additional ammunition in attempting to convey those two basic cornerstones of educational theatre training.

My emphasis on understanding that all theatre exists because

of dramatic conventions accepted by audience and artist alike stems from my belief that theatre audiences of the past accepted what they saw in performance as presenting an acceptable representation of actuality, and that comprehending that viewpoint permits greater access to the literature and performance conventions of the past. Another term for what I'm calling "conventions" can be taken from Roger's definition: the latitude of an implicitly or explicitly defined task, or what the Commission on Theatre Research has called "impression structuring" by the playwright. By exploring what the task is, or was, and the extent to which the definitions of that task were implicitly or explicitly known to artists, we can put many critical views in clearer perspective.

For example: ever since Aristotle's POETICS surfaced in the late middle ages, one school of criticism has accepted--and to a large extent amplified--that Hellenistic critic's view of the later plays of Euripides. While few today (one hopes) would still maintain that Euipidean heroines are monstrous and essentially unbalanced creations, a few other phrases still appear with regularity, which have their origins in Aristotle's distaste for Euripides. The last of the triumvirate of classic Greek playwrights was, one reads, a realist (or moving toward realism) by comparison with Aeschylus and Sophocles; Euripides questioned the existence of the Olympian dieties and was the first playwright to express what later ages would recognize as an essentially existentialist viewpoint; Euripides was a rebel, writing subversive plays which challenged

the ethos of Athenian society; while a master at characterization, Euripides was relatively sloppy at plot construction and positively shoddy in his use of the chorus; and so on.

Many of these statements, or variations of them, are to be found in much of the available dramatic criticism of the Greek playwrights. While by no means universally accepted, they still haunt us and appear with depressing regularity in student papers and examinations. If, however, one assumes that Euripidean plays are the way they are because of specific strategic choices made by the playwright, some of the statements become pointless, and others need refinement. If we assume (as H.D.F. Kitto asked us to a number of years ago) that the plays of Euripides are the way they are because Euripides chose to make them that way, instead of assuming that Euripides would have done a much better job of it had he only paid closer attention to what his contemporary Sophocles was doing in OEDIPUS TYRANNOS, we can explore some fruitful questions in a potentially useful way. Rather than calling Euripides to task for having been sloppy with his construction and his chorus, it would be far more beneficial to look at that construction and those choruses (as Albert Weiner has recently done) to see how Euripides was consciously changing the explicitly defined task provided him by the conditions of theatrical production in 5th century B.C. Athens. Were his changes subversive, intended to subtly alter the playwright's task explicitly defined by the demos and by the archon basileos? Or were they well within the latitude of the task he was

given? Again, rather than assuming--as many have--that Euripides was a closet atheist, it's far more heuristic to explore the latitudes of his society's explicit views on the gods--it was, after all, in 419 when the mutilations of the herms caused a scandal which cost several mutilators their lives and sent Alkibiades into exile--and then to look again at the surviving plays. I suspect we would discover that Euripides has more affinities to Hans Koenig than to Madalyn O'Hair Murray.

Time does not permit a further exploration of the series of "straw man" questions I set up about the ways in which explorations of the strategic choices made by one playwright within the latitudes of the task he set himself might help us to more precisely describe Euripides's particular contributions to Greek theatre. I would hope some of the implications are obvious. It is, however, perhaps easier to deal with "style" in terms of classic drama, or with theatre in which choices were governed by conditions radically different from our own. It is less obvious when faced with a contemporary artifact, close both in time and in implicit assumptions to our own lives. Let me, therefore, explore one relatively recent play as an example, and attempt to indicate how the definition of style provided this morning can assist our analysis.

The contemporary English playwright Steve Gooch wrote, in 1974, a play called FEMALE TRANSPORT. Set in the first decades of the nineteenth century, it depicts six female convicts being

transported from England to Australia. While in performance it is a powerful work, the text is difficult; there is little plot action in the traditional sense, little characterization (and, indeed, virtually no character development), no moment of clear climax. It is, in short, structurally a "situational" drama like so many plays of the last decade, in which a group of characters is placed in a confining situation. The situation delimits the characters' choices, and the characters' reactions to the situation provide the basis for the dramatic interest. In choosing this structural technique, Gooch is, of course, continuing the approach chosen, at times, by Pinter, Rabe, and Shepard.

Having said that, however, we are not very far along in dealing with the play, particularly if we're attempting to do so within the context of a classsroom. Indeed, the label "situational" is in many respects no more helpful than the traditional generic labels of "Expressionism," "Romanticism," or "Realism" have proven to be. The label provides a neat cubby-hole which may be handy for testing purposes, but indeed stops further thought or contemplation.

Knowing that Gooch chose to work in the situational format should permit, instead, the initial latitudes of his task to be explored. Within the confines of the task explicitly defined for the playwright in this instance--that is, to create a play for a politically radical theatre group in order to expose the inevitable results of capitalism--what were Gooch's options? Given his choice

of subject--the enforced population of an Australia rich in resources but lacking a significant working population through the British government's policies of sending as many criminals there as possible--additional choices were possible, both in subject matter and in dramatic technique. He might, for example, have written a heavily didactic piece in a neo-Brechtian mode (although to have done so would have been, in the mid 1970s, more than a bit old-fashioned). The choices Gooch made both define the style of the resultant play, as well as providing us with tools for interpretation. In terms of FEMALE TRANSPORT, the tools assist us as well in understanding where the play text is faulty, where some elements--a pair of lengthy speeches in which the playwright's political message is explicitly presented to the audience--are at odds with the play's functional structure. In short, we can with some precision pin-point the places in Gooch's FEMALE TRANSPORT where the playwright's choices are inconsistent (in this case, both in form and matter) with the latitudes the playwright himself provided.

I have deliberately chosen, in Gooch's FEMALE TRANSPORT, an unfamiliar example to avoid the very real problems of personal perception. A far more familiar example might be Shepard's BURIED CHILD, for which it could be argued that the purposely confused chronology of the family's background is inconsistent with the equally purposeful choice to employ the physical trappings of "realism" (much the same charge was made concerning Albee's THE LADY FROM DUBUQUE earlier this year). The point, however, would

need much more detailed discussion than I can give here, but I hope that the benefits of using Professor Gross's terminology are clear.

As Roger pointed out, one response to all of this is to find it merely semantic quibbling; indeed the extended examples I have given could be stated in many different ways to make the same point, and that point would remain somewhat obvious and unremarkable to most. The importance of this attempt at both defining style and employing the definition is not that it provides a startlingly fresh new approach to dramatic literature, criticism, and theory; we are not attempting to come up with yet another critical jargon for the 1980s to replace the critical jargons of earlier decades, nor are we maintaining that the adoption of this approach will solve the problems of our discipline in a magical way. Instead we can only strive for commonality of terms, and the resulting precision that should follow. When we have explored the strategic choices that both Euripides and Steve Gooch made in creating their plays, and examine those choices within the latitudes of their defined tasks, then perhaps we can begin explaining the task of dramaturgy in a more convincing manner to our students, and both remove some of the fear that "style" now engenders and perhaps even prevent some of the artificial archness endemic to "stylized" productions.